

Using Assessment to Introduce Incremental Change

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Big Brother. Boss Compositionalist (Sledd 2001). Writing Program Administrators usually take great pains to avoid these pejorative titles. Those of us who administer and direct various writing programs and assessments tend to describe ourselves as coordinator instead of director, seeking to foster programs instead of prescribing mandates, relying on core statements such as program goals and student learning outcomes instead standardized syllabi or directed assignments. We recommend instead of require, and we tend to sample instead of report. Even though we conduct our work at a wide range of institutions and thus deal with a multitude of various kinds of institutional directives and boundaries, as a group a “similar set of aims prevails” (Durst, in a WPA review of Haswell’s Beyond Outcomes: Assessment and Instruction within a University Writing Program, Spring 2007, p. 138).

Even though I work at a relatively small college, I have been able to model my assessment duties based on those at Washington State University, by using an assessment tool commonly called a Junior Writing Portfolio. Like my mentors at WSU, as the WPA who coordinates an assessment which involves a “varied cast of characters and positions” (Durst, p. 139), I have witnessed how assessment can be used to make incremental changes which favor faculty development in writing pedagogies. Yet the recurrent allusions to totalitarianism and slavery invite us to reconsider the intellectual qualities of our work as WPA’s, particularly those of us who also must argue that our work is as much scholarship as service, housed in English departments whose specialized others focus the research on a range of literary and cultural texts, for whom the teaching of composition has long been associated with dreary standardization, duties and drudgery. We also must explain ourselves to our own families and neighbors, who often recall experiences with “bonehead English classes” (as my own neighbor typically does) and who exclaim with mock concern that they had better “watch their English” around us. As WPA’s many of us must regularly confront the fact that we are part of an academic bureaucracy, and we seek ways to collaborate and confound that same bureaucracy, especially when “assessment” is the job at hand.

Assessment is more often associated with testing (often standardized), and it’s difficult to make the case that program and institutional assessments of student writing can also be seen as scholarship, as a justifiable area for research, and perhaps even more difficult to make the case that as a WPA, I can “use” assessment practices for faculty development, for mentoring, for fostering collegiality. I suspect that my practices would be more difficult to implement at a flagship research institution. But at small colleges and universities, assessment practices can be employed for these alternative activities. In my own small department of a baker’s dozen teachers - equally represented by full time instructors and tenure/tenure track professors – assessment of student writing has become an essential tool for faculty development, both within the department and across the campus community. Given that our institutional missions stress effective teaching and campus service, I have found that my colleagues have – generally speaking – welcomed my coordination of student assessments and faculty development. Given my long tenure and my evolving roles at my institution, I’ve been able to take a long view of the

ecosystem, and since I have been about this job for some time now, I want simply to give the gist of my experiences, following a timeline of writing assessments that I have found generatively useful for promoting positive incremental changes.

The historical records embedded in our institutional self studies and program reviews allow for a retrospective on how assessment procedures have developed, incrementally at my institution. My experiences with writing assessment began in the mid 1980's when my institution was heavily invested in freshman placement testing. As an adjunct in the English department who was teaching classes in developmental English, I was given an opportunity to "conduct research" with a senior colleague who was involved with a system-wide FIPSE grant to investigate placement procedures and first year writing expectations. I was given the task of locating and summarizing the current literature on placement processes, and during the task of compiling an annotated bibliography, I became convinced that one shot placement testing was essentially flawed. My so-called developmental students were often misplaced, some because of prompt design and others because their writing processes did not allow for their best work in an hour's writing time. The institutional record of this beginning work in writing assessment is detailed in the earliest historical records, the self study report of 1989. At that time, we had piloted an assessment of our English composition sequence, including our developmental course, by asking for instructors to voluntarily collect and submit student writing samples.

The early history of writing assessment records our first dilemma: that of moving from volunteer submissions to required submissions. These were years when we relied on the collective energies of instructors who were fully invested with our program. Because a sizable number of composition instructors were adjuncts, we depended on the good will of senior faculty to contribute, and while most of the tenured faculty did teach occasional sections of freshman writing, many of them were not willing or interested in composition research. As we moved departmentally, from 1989 through the early 1990's, away from the pre / post designs associated with freshman placement testing, into portfolio assessments, the institutional program reviews record incremental changes in attitude, participation, and refinements in our processes for collecting student work and in our methodologies for evaluation.

When I assumed the position of Director of Writing Assessment, as an instructor in 1991, because of another colleague's movement to a chair's position, I was again offered opportunities to further my research interests; in short, my department enticed me to take on the directorship, overseeing placement procedures, by offering to assist me with pursuit of the terminal degree. Entering a PhD program in August 1991, I was immediately impressed with the increased visibility of composition and rhetoric within the discipline, and I gradually focused my scholarly interests on Writing Across the Curriculum and portfolio assessment.

In 1992, since I work within a publicly funded state system of colleges and universities, I was just beginning to appreciate the control that the state legislators had over curricular decisions at the publicly funded institutions of higher education. At that time, I became very involved with a proactive group of faculty around the state who met at an annual conference to consider and present locally conducted research in writing assessment. I began to conduct surveys, interviews, and workshops on my campus, to ascertain how much interest and practices were already

established because the current wisdom was that the state legislature was planning to mandate phasing out developmental programs in the state colleges and universities.

During the early 1990's I spent a great deal of time developing a rubric, an evaluation tool, based on my admiration for Edward White's work. I also found myself becoming an advocate for better writing assignments, based on the work of John Bean. With the support of an academic vice-chancellor, I led a number of small workshops and forums in which I planted the seeds for a campus-wide writing assessment. I also developed a survey of faculty to determine the kinds and amounts of writing assignments being given across the campus. Fully aware that public perceptions become political realities, I was a visible and regular advocate for writing assessments, asserting my mantra that we must be proactive and determine our own assessment methodologies before we were mandated to use something prescriptive that would be handed down without our ability to control the measures used.

Indeed, we were ordered in 1996 to eliminate our developmental writing courses by 1998; however, we were also mandated due to performance based funding formulas, to demonstrate that students were proficient writers. Fortunately, we were positioned at that time to make our case that a Junior Writing Portfolio was a logical assessment instrument, especially given that a significant number of students who matriculated in our degree programs had entered as transfer students from a range of community colleges and other institutions. I began by convincing my own department members that we could manage the task of evaluating student writing from across our campus, especially since we would phase in this assessment as we phased out our developmental programs. In Fall of 1996, we evaluated nine Junior Writing Portfolios (JWP), and in the following spring and summer, we evaluated twenty-five, and then nine-one portfolios, gradually building up to the annual evaluation of approximately 700-800 during three evaluation periods throughout the academic year.

I vividly remember coming into the Faculty Assembly meeting in the spring of 1995, when our proposed changes in our writing assessment practices was to be voted upon by our faculty (since faculty governance at my institution is faculty driven). We had managed to satisfy everyone, apparently, since the proposal passed without any faculty dissent. After that assembly, a colleague the School of Education approached me as we left the building, curious to know if the portfolio review would be also be required of "our students" who were on other campuses. I was astonished to discover that our professional schools had distant education programs around the state, in business management, elementary and early education, and nursing. Not only did the changes required by our adoption of a Junior Writing Portfolio necessitate building the program into the curriculum on our campus, it also involved traveling around the state to four additional campuses to coordinate the portfolio assessment at these other system and regional campuses. I had intended to foster writing across the curriculum in a comprehensive way on my campus, but I never could have anticipated the far-reaching impact that our adoption of this assessment tool would have across the entire system of campuses. I had to create liaisons with colleagues in all departments, majors, and schools at four campuses. These liaisons have often been rewarding, and they have always been challenging, especially when we realized that students who failed to demonstrate proficiency in writing had to be given opportunities for additional instruction.

In 1996, along with our proposal to initiate the JWP, we had created a course that would help to remediate and to develop student writing skills at the sophomore level, directed at students who either could not pass the review, even after a second portfolio submission, or for students who simply had no papers as juniors to compile a portfolio. At first, I was the sole instructor of the course, and I also taught the course to a small number of students at distant campuses via electronic mail and occasional visits. Over the decade that we have integrated the portfolio review into our general education expectations, however, other instructors have gradually assumed the teaching of AEGL 201, Writing in the University, and now eight additional instructors have assisted with the sometime arduous task of teaching seniors in majors that range from biology and business, to education, to nursing, and sociology how to “write” in the academic setting. As a core group of teachers, we have to meet regularly to share syllabi and assignments, to discuss expectations, and to troubleshoot. We’ve had to collaborate even though we sometimes have differing views; some of the faculty who now teach the course place more emphasis on developmental and remedial sentence-level concerns, while others who now teach the course emphasize synthesis of source-based material and argument. Our recent discussions seem to be leading us into more discipline-specific sections of the course with proposals to initiate sections of the course that target particular majors, such as business or nursing students. I foresee that more team-teaching and thus more intense collaborative curricular designs are indeed in our future, as we continue to refine delivery of AEGL 201.

I also continually meet with diverse faculty across our campus to discuss expectations, to share student portfolios with advisors, and to recruit and train additional faculty as graders. Because we are a campus heavily invested in the process of program review, and because all of our major programs require students to take a general education core, the Junior Writing Portfolio has been adopted by a number of degree programs as an assessment that allows insights into student writing skills; indeed, many programs such as our School of Education have mandated that students must “satisfy” the assessment review as prerequisites to upper-level courses or activities such as practice teaching or senior capstone courses. Our Institutional Research office has been proactive in creating a massive database to which I add three times annually, so that faculty advisors, department chairs and school deans, and our Registrar and I have regular conversations about those occasional students who reach graduate status without having satisfied the portfolio review. In many respects, the reporting of student results has fallen to me, and I anticipate regular activities such as setting up the semester’s database of submissions, recruiting and monitoring faculty graders, recording scores, calibrating third readings, and counseling students who can be advised to appeal their failed first submissions by revising and resubmitting.

We had additionally argued, when phasing out our developmental course, that our caps on enrollment in our first year composition classes would have to be reduced (to 18 and 20 in AEGL 101 / 102 respectively), and that we would need to closely monitor instructional practices and student learning outcomes in our first year composition classes. For many years, while placement testing, we had reported our placement results and our successful completion of AEGL 101, developmental writing, as pre / post results. Probably because we had become so attuned to viewing our composition sequence as a continuum through which to assess student writing skills, we determined that we would use a modified portfolio in freshman English as a form of general education program review. We established a departmental assessment

committee, which became the primary site for monitoring and refining this freshman assessment instrument. We labeled our composition sequence assessment the Freshman Folders, and we began annually to collect student writing from both AEGL 101 and AEGL 102, by starting with a selected sample from all of the AEGL 101 rolls, which was tracked into AEGL 102. After the student samples were gathered at the end of a Spring semester, a team of raters evaluate the folders, using the same rubric that we had refined for JWP purposes, and the data gathered and analyzed from this review is regularly shared with the entire department each fall.

For over a decade now, our department has made changes in our composition program based on our assessment findings. In particular, our assessments have forced us to pay more attention to source-based writing, and we have consistently made small, but significant changes to our freshman composition program, as well as informing major programs across campus, since our use of assessment rubrics and procedures has become a model for other major programs seeking advice and structures for their own assessments. Our rubrics have been modified for programs such as foreign language and communications. Our methods for collecting data have influenced our fledgling First Year Program. Our use of benchmarks and standards and our systematic approaches to data collection, analysis, and sharing of results have created our assessment feedback loop. Our annual retreat discussions have inspired other departments to meet collectively at yearly intervals to share assessment findings and make curricular changes.

As we have moved incrementally forward with writing assessment, we have also been able to petition effectively for additional support of our program. When phasing out developmental writing courses, we also argued that we would need to expand our student writing center by hiring a full time director and increasing tutor training and actual space. We were thus able to use the legislative state mandates in the late 1990's to shift our writing center out of a small classroom into a spacious writing center complete with computer terminals and consulting areas. The connections that were made between the composition program, the writing center, and the Junior Writing Portfolio assessment were significant. The consultants became the front line of contact with the student body about the portfolio, as the receivers of the portfolios three times a year. Originally, we had designated mid-semester as the "due date" for portfolio submissions, but with student input, we determined that early semester was a better time for receiving the portfolios, which jumpstarted our writing center's involvement through early semester workshops and consultations, well ahead of the crush of student requests that tended to accompany the mid-semester assignment crunch.

I do not feel that I am unique in this regard as many conversations and subject threads on the WPA list demonstrate similar programmatic changes. For instance, a series of voices in a recent thread (dated 8/17/07) report "joint research" and "people who are instrumental in campus curriculum committees" such as general education and various on and off campus networks. Not surprisingly, many WPAs report having a good relationship with campus constituents such as athletic directors, institutional research directors, department chairs, provosts, service learning, first year programs, and learning communities directors and coordinators. In many respects, our work as writing program administrators gives us multiple opportunities to interact with faculty, staff, and administrators, and each interaction promises to become a site for proactive connections which in turn can lead to personal or programmatic development.

Parallel work across campus on student retention and First Year experiences have been the most fruitful collaborations occasioned by our writing assessment program. Because of our reputation for proactive data collection, we have become the “go to” department for expertise in general education and First Year assessment. I was asked to contribute to an ad hoc committee on First Year concerns, along with my knowledge of first year composition, which allowed me to develop mutual goals with our institutional Advisement Office and our newly developed First Year Success program, such as instituting a First Year Common Reading requirement.

Because I have become very aware, most recently, that our department is changing, as folks retire, as institutional memories can be lost, it’s essential to bring in, coach, and mentor new faculty, who are tenure-track junior faculty, can be encouraged and shown how to do this kind of assessment research and scholarship. To those ends, I have become a new faculty mentor, engaged and informing a newly instituted peer review process.

Special attention in WPA preparation programs now gives many initiates seeking WPA positions at least some exposure to leadership and management skills. Perhaps most importantly, a WPA needs to delegate and maintain balance, as well as finding ways to recharge and renew one’s energies. For myself, finding new challenges (such as recently becoming a National Writing Project site director) has been essential in two ways: With new responsibilities, I am more able and more willing to ask others – particularly new junior faculty - who have expressed interest in assuming writing assessment duties to do so, thus I can become a mentor to new, younger faculty who need to develop scholarship and service interests. In turn, I can recharge and develop new scholarship interests of my own; in fact, the incremental changes that I advocate making as a WPA are reflected in my own development as a scholar.

Institutional changes are mostly incremental, and some set backs must be anticipated. Realistically, as a WPA, I know that certain times each semester will require managerial skills: recruiting graders, setting up databases, reporting results. Other periods of the semester allow for more creativity: holding meetings, setting up workshops, visiting with interested faculty and establishing allies, submitting proposals, attending conferences. As a WPA, I’ve sampled a number of texts, publications, and workshops which have helped me to rethink and hone such skills and concepts (see Ward, in WPA Spring 2007, pp. 66-67), but for me, attending the WPA conferences and lurking on the WPA list have been the most productive steps that I have taken in this regard.

I have and do still encounter particular kinds of resistance; some faculty will never see assessment as a worthwhile and / or scholarly activity; others will actively resist the expansion of the assessments. My personal feeling is that participation should be voluntary, never coerced, although I do try to enhance and attract faculty by providing incentives and stipends and real / tangible rewards. For instance, faculty who read and evaluate Junior Writing Portfolios do receive payments that have been increased over the past several years, and I’ve been able to appeal to junior faculty in particular by urging these faculty to accept payments as additional travel funds. Since junior faculty have to build a tenure and promotion file through conference presentations, and because our institutional funding is quite limited, the additional travel monies

are quite attractive to faculty across the campus. Currently, in addition to English department faculty, evaluators have come from other departments in the humanities and from the School of Education. Faculty who engage in the process generally come to a fuller understanding of student writing; however, occasionally faculty members who attempt to evaluate the immense variety of student work cannot overcome particular ways of knowing and disciplinary biases. I've had faculty who tell me that they simply cannot evaluate student writing that doesn't have a distinct thesis, that they cannot make a judgment about writing in chemistry, biology, and other disciplines where lab-oriented, inductively organized writing is the norm. Other faculty – particularly English literature experts – share their concerns about business-oriented genres, especially since most business papers in the portfolios lack the kinds of source documentation that humanities instructors prefer.

Other kinds of resistance that I regularly encounter deal with what some instructors view as intrusions into their class expectations. In particular, with the Freshman Folder assessments, a few of my colleagues have resisted sharing their students' work because collecting the papers does require a certain amount of their time, to make copies and to organize the work for the Freshman Folders. Because we have also begun to request that instructors in first year composition also ask for some pre / post assessments of student reading skills, I am beginning to realize that there is a tipping point, beyond which I probably cannot intrude into other classrooms, and that some instructors will tolerate assessments to a point, not to be pushed.

Regularly refreshing myself with sourcebooks such as the Allyn & Bacon collection (2002) and keeping up with research published in various journals are also essential. When called upon to defend or explain any of the particulars of my own institutional assessment practices, being able to contextualize our local situation in a broader, more historical or social context has been invaluable. Being able to assert that I have researched various other possibilities for setting up writing assessments and have relied on effectively implemented programs at institutions such as WSU has been a persuasive argument over and over again, when students, faculty, or staff have asked “why” concerning our assessment practices. Being aware of the perspectives of various stakeholders has allowed me to take a long view while dealing with those who are possibly critical of changes while understanding that sometimes those who are critical just need to be more involved with the processes of guiding and coordinating our program.

Finally, as noted by White (in “Use it or Lose it: Power and the WPA”), like most experienced WPAs, I have found that my most important “power” as a WPA involved with institutional assessment is my ability to improve instruction, even with tenured faculty who admittedly have less initiative than new faculty. I can set up meetings with new faculty to discuss the junior writing portfolio requirements, and thus initiate conversations with particular faculty who want assistance with setting up their own writing assignments or who desire to become graders (an especially attractive task because I am able to offer payment in the form of additional travel monies to supplement a relatively meager institutional allotment). I can also communicate with department heads and school deans through conversations about the department or school's assessment data, especially with those departments and schools whose students do not do as well on average as might be desired. I can regularly ask for surveys and inventories of faculty, and then use results to initiate conversations or forums about the kinds of writing that faculty report

using across the disciplines. Whenever accreditation reviews are required, I can assist with data collection to ascertain institutional effectiveness for any program or major that reportedly values good writing as a desired outcome for graduates.

To conclude, as Durst does in his review of WSU's large and ambitious writing program, using writing assessment to foster long term changes takes considerable time, effort, and mentoring, but the outcomes can clearly be significantly positive. Using a general education writing assessment deliberately to promote writing both across the curriculum and within the majors can be an effective pedagogical tool. Writing can become a valued feature of the campus culture, and an effective tool for faculty development as well as for measurable student learning outcomes.

Works Cited

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